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Justifying genocide



"THE DESERTER,"

a film directed by Burt Kennedy.

There are certain films about which the most interesting fact is that they were made at all. This latter-day western is one of them, though not always for the most obvious reasons.

As a film, it's an unambitious venture and in the ordinary course of events would probably not be commented on at all in these pages. But a film with the title, "The Deserter," has a certain amount of implicit interest these days. Even though the advance publicity made it clear that the setting was the American West in the 1880s, still there was the possibility that a timely comment on current questions was being made in this fashion.

The film concerns an army captain, played with appropriate stoical derring-do by Bekim Fehmiu (What have westerns come to when heroes are played by actors whose names couldn't even be pronounced by the likes of Tom Mix and Hopalong Cassidy?—but more on this later), whose wife is skinned alive by Apaches.

The captain "deserts" the army and sets out on a one-man campaign of blood vengeance. Training himself to out-Apache the Apaches, the captain becomes the quintessence of the primeval jungle warrior. Naturally, as a white man, he can beat the Apaches at their own game if he just sets his mind to it.

Back to the fold

After a while, he gets so good at this kind of thing, that one of the army's more practical generals sends for him and offers him a chance to come back into the fold by leading a special "guerilla" expedition to attack the Apaches and break up a planned Indian offensive.

So the captain organizes his special band of unorthodox fighters, trains them in the ways of desert warfare, and sets out to take the Apaches by surprise. The rest of the film details the exploits of the group as they learn how to work together and eventually vanquish the Indians.

If this sounds vaguely like "The Dirty Dozen" and "The Wild Bunch," the parallel is hardly accidental. Clearly, in an age in which the average American male has had his last illusions concerning his individual ability to affect the course of events consummately exterminated, there is an appeal for work. Approved For Release 2005/01/13 : CIA-RDP88-01365R000300060020-9

In the course of the film, which, I should say, is both crisply directed and professionally acted, many curious strains emerge. First, there's the deserter himself. Unlike his contemporary counterparts, he quits the army not because they're engaged in an unjustifiable war of genocide, but because they aren't killing Indians fast enough or efficiently enough to suit him. Then there's the general, engagingly portrayed by John Huston as one of those plain-talking, to-hell-with-regulations, hard-drinking, amiable souls who always manage to rescue the army from the stupidities of its bureaucracy. Just a typical American general, in other words, the very antithesis of those faceless, bullet-headed cretins who, we have been led to believe by unscrupulous antiwar propagandists, conduct America's present war of genocide in Indochina.

Capitalist guerillas

Next comes the Robin Hood image. As every patriotic American and loyal Walt Disney fan knows, all "people's guerrilla" groups—from the time of Robin Hood to the Maquis—are on the side of god, country and the capitalist system—although not always in that sequence. In fact, if something resembling a guerrilla group turns up among the enemy, we know they are just "bands of terrorists" or "suicide squads of fanatics." And so, at the very moment when the military requirements of American imperialism have unleashed a massive technological war against an agrarian people, we are treated to the sight of American guerrillas fighting the savage foe whose genocidal extermination becomes a matter of practical necessity because of that enemy's fanaticism.

Now there is absolutely no historical evidence to suggest that the American Army was ever able to beat the Indians at their own game. The Indian nations were invariably defeated by capitalist technology, duplicitous "treaties" and the extermination of their sources of food supply. There never was anything noble or heroic about the ugly trade of Indian-fighting, which is probably why imperialist literature has been trying to make it so for more than a century.

One could go on, for the film is curiöser and curiöser. Just to cite some quick examples, we have a minister who is an expert with dynamite, an unruly black soldier who becomes a disciplined member of the company out of respect for the fearlessness and fairness of the captain, a renegade Indian (naturally) who is, of course, the most "civilized" Indian in the flick, and the general glorification of that style of warfare which the CIA today likes to call its "Department of Dirty Tricks." And we even have scenes of old Apache women loading bullets into cartridge belts, thus providing the justification for the subsequent mass slaughter of all the Indians, including children and old women.

Well, you get the idea. Now, I'm not saying that someone up there in the bureaucracy of the Dept. of Psychological Warfare and Mind Manipulation called in the writers and producers of this film and laid out a scenario for them. I'm not even suggesting that the film's contemporary relevance.